Territorialising the Non-Territorial: Manufacturing Dysfunctional States

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Fragmentation of the European Security Order – a brief history

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Following the early 1990s argument of the so-called compensation theory—that Kosovo can go, but that the territorial loss on one side will be compensated at the other corner of then Socialist Yugoslavia—the idea of partitioning Bosnia and Herzegovina (further on in the text, we refer to the country by its historic name: Bosnia) has ever since resided in many minds and plans across Europe.

Why Bosnia is actually the best guarantor and protector of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Croatia and Serbia can be explained through simple and accurate logic. The greater-state project and its territorial fulfilment at the expense of Bosnia would hardly remain confined to Zagreb and Belgrade.

The territorial extension/enlargement of Croatia and Serbia on expenses of Bosnia (romantically preached for the past few decades, essentially as a mental and ideological compensation for the colossal socio-economic and political shortcomings of the post-YU Southern Slavs) would—through the compensation and domino-theory effect—trigger a series of reactions among the protagonists of greater-state projects in the neighbourhood. These political passions and drives already articulate their voices in a coherent and organized political way—primarily in Albania and Bulgaria, and then through 'connected pots' in Italy and Hungary, even in Romania).

Having this in mind, it is safe to claim that preserving the territorial integrity of Bosnia is the best guarantee for protecting the territorial integrity of Croatia and Serbia (and, for that matter, Bosnia's twin, Macedonia).

Hence, Donbasization in Europe began long ago (neither2022, nor 2014) – early 1990s, with the dismantling of Socialist Yugoslavia. If we advocate a fair and lasting solution for Eastern Europe and overall restoration of the Helsinki accords, we must maintain similar principles and conditions for Southeastern Europe and post-Yugoslav space, too.

In dominant interpretations of the war in Bosnia, it is often claimed that ethnic partition was its tragic consequence – the result of violence, ethnic cleansing, and wartime conquests. However, the historical sequence of events points to the opposite conclusion: ethnic partition was a political project that preceded the war and made it inevitable. It did not arise as a result of the war – it was its direct cause. The war against (one of the equal Yugoslav successor states;) Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was organized and waged as to realize the ethnic partition of its territory.

Lisbon 1992: Antagonising Otherness, Institutionalizing the Tensions Religio-ethnic Partition in Bosnia as the Cause, Not the Consequence, of War

At the Lisbon Conference in February 1992, under the auspices of the European Community, envoys Lord Carrington and José Cutileiro presented a plan for the constitutional reorganization of Bosnia based on the religious (but presented as ethnic) principle. This plan, known as the Carrington–Cutileiro Plan, envisaged transforming the Republic of Bosnia into a state composed of three "constituent units" defined according to doctored ethno-religious majorities.

Thus, several months before the outbreak of open armed conflict, the idea was introduced that Bosnia could not survive as a unified political community of citizens, but only as a collection of territorially separated religious Bantustans ('collectivities'). The internationally mediated (to say fabricated) formula of religious or ethnic post-YU partition became the starting point for redefining the sovereignty of the YU successor states. This model, of course, suited Serbia and Croatia, which did not conceal their expansionist aspirations toward Bosnian state territory, as it enabled them to exercise direct influence over parts of Bosnia.

War as the Implementation of a Pre-Designed Model

The war that began in April 1992 did not aim at the conquest of the entire territory of Bosnia by any of the armies involved. The objective was the establishment and territorial consolidation of homogeneously doctored areas. In that sense, military operations were not directed toward integrating the state under a single authority, but toward its fragmentation.

The aggression carried out against Bosnia by the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) sought to establish a territorially unified entity under Serbian dominance. At the same time, the policy of the Republic of Croatia aimed to establish a Croatian territorial unit on the soil of

Bosnia. In both cases, the goal was the creation of 'ethnically homogeneous territories' by using religion as determinant – precisely those conceptually outlined in Lisbon.

Even the Army of the Republic of Bosnia, although formally committed to preserving the territorial integrity of the state, did not wage war with the aim of militarily defending the entire territory, but operated within the logic of territorial demarcation that had already been politically articulated. The war thus became the means of implementing a previously legitimized political formula. After the first year of war and the expulsion of populations, territories had become markedly "ethnically" defined. Naturally, the Bosnian Army was in the most difficult position, as it had to organize the defense of the state from zero and attempt to liberate occupied territories. Unfortunately, this task was halted near Banja Luka in 1995.

The Logic of Homogenization: Why Partition Produces War

The concept "ethnically homogeneous territories" in religiously mixed states is not a neutral administrative proposal. By its internal logic, it is deeply conflictual. In societies such as Bosnia, where populations, settlements, and cities have historically been intermingled, territorial homogenization cannot be achieved through political declaration – it requires the physical separation of people. War is thus an instrument for separating religious groups and manufacturing "ethnically pure" territories. In this way, the history of shared life in Bosnia is directly attacked and a barbaric attempt is made to destroy it.

To separate religiously mixed populations into separate, 'ethnically' homogeneous territories, force is required. The borders of such territories cannot be drawn without pressure, coercion, and control of space. Consequently, imposing the concept of homogeneous territories implicitly entails accepting the use of force as a means of political reorganization. This concept, in fact, invokes force in order to achieve political objectives – as history does not know any other example.

In other words, in multireligious or polyethnic states, the idea of (of doctoring the) territorial ethnic homogenization logically and inevitably leads to armed conflict – not by default but by design. If the political goal is defined as the creation of a "pure" territory, then military control of space becomes the means of achieving that goal. War is not a deviation from the plan – it is its instrument.

British Postcolonial Precedents: The Pattern of Partition

The Lisbon Plan was not an isolated precedent. Similar patterns of ethno-religious partition – brought to Lisbon by the former British Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington – had appeared in many British postcolonial arrangements that produced lasting violence and instability.

The partition of colonial India resulted in the creation of two states, India and Pakistan, on the basis of a religious criterion, accompanied by mass migrations and prolonged conflicts.

In Palestine, a plan of ethno-religious partition led to the creation of the State of Israel, while the Palestinian question remained unresolved, producing decades of conflict.

In Cyprus, following independence from the United Kingdom, an ethno-religious partition was established between the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus and the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, whose status remains a source of tension.

In all these cases, ethno-religious territorialization was presented as a rational solution for

achieving stability. Yet the long-term result was enduring partitions and chronic instability.

Stability as Rhetoric, Instability as Structure

The rhetoric accompanying such plans is always the same: recognize the "reality on the ground," institutionalize differences, and thereby prevent violence. However, when ethno-religious differences are transformed into territorial boundaries, they become lines dividing sovereignty. And when sovereignty is separated along (fabricated) religious or ethnic lines, the state ceases to be a political community of citizens and becomes an arena of permanent negotiation among the doctored 'collective' identities. Such a state, unfortunately, turns into a battleground of incompatible interests. This means it cannot develop, because it is internally torn apart by imposed irrationalities, with the clear intention of rendering it dysfunctional.

Bosnia is a paradigmatic example of this logic. From Lisbon in 1992 to Dayton in 1995, the principle of ethno-religious partition remained constant. The war did not produce partition; the politics of partition produced the war. And when the war was formally ended, partition remained the source of permanent conflict – keeping hostage the entre Southern Slavs theatre, far beyond Bosnian borders.

Conclusion

Ethno-religious partition in Bosnia was not the consequence of the war – it was its cause. As long as this principle remains embedded in the constitutional order, political instability will persist as its structural outcome. A state organized around territorially entrenched ethno-religious sovereignty cannot escape recurring crises, because it institutionalizes fragmentation rather than overcoming it.

Moreover, if elevated from an exceptional response to conflict into a legitimized principle, religious and ethnic partition would not remain normatively contained. In international politics, principles rarely function in isolation; once validated, they acquire precedential force beyond their original context. The acceptance of territorial reconfiguration on the basis of religious and ethnic homogenization would provide renewed justificatory resources for projects historically articulated as "greater-state" formations.

In the post-Yugoslav space, concepts associated with a "Greater Croatia"—particularly when read retrospectively through the demographic consequences of Operation Storm and the potential secession of Catholic-majority areas of Bosnia—could be reinterpreted as incomplete processes of 'ethnic' consolidation. Similarly, longstanding ideas of a "Greater Serbia," linked to the secession of Serb-controlled territories from Bosnia, would acquire strengthened normative grounding under a partition-validated framework. Concepts of a "Greater Albania," premised on unification between Kosovo and Albania and extending to Albanian-populated regions of Macedonia, would likewise gain legitimizing logic from the same principle. Even less institutionally developed territorial imaginaries—such as Bulgarian claims historically directed toward parts of Macedonia, or pan-Turkic visions centered on Turkey and Turkic Central Asia—could be discursively reframed within a normalized paradigm of ethnic territorial reordering.

Once partition is recognized as a legitimate remedy, historical revisionisms cease to appear as destabilizing deviations and instead become claims awaiting strategic opportunity (As numerous authors—such as Prof. Bajrektarević, Bilandžić, Perović, Frčkoski, to name but a few—have claimed and written ever since the 1990s.) In this sense, the principle is inherently expansive: its acceptance in one context transforms it into a portable justificatory template.

Such a chain reaction would not produce stability, but a spiral of competitive territorial claims.

Each realized partition would generate new minorities, new grievances, and new demands for further “corrections”. The region would risk becoming locked into a permanent cycle of destabilization, in which borders are rendered provisional and sovereignty conditional.

For the sake of lasting peace in Southeast of the Continent, and all over Europe, it is therefore imperative to abandon the principle of religious, doctored partition as projected in Bosnia. Stability cannot be built upon the territorialization of religious and (constructed) ethnic exclusivity. It requires reaffirming the state as a political community of citizens rather than a negotiated balance of segregated ‘collectivities’. Without such a shift, the consequences may extend far beyond Bosnia, with unpredictable and potentially far-reaching effects for the entire Continent.

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